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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined the nature of social and cultural contexts as they shaped literary practices in a combined fifth/sixth-grade classroom. Research questions focused on the meanings given to the reading and discussion of literature within the embedded contexts of classroom and community. The five focal students for the study differed in gender, socioeconomic status, age, and perceived ability. Data sources included audiotaped literature discussions, interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administrators, school and district artifacts, and field notes. One of the focal students, a fifth-grader, came from a close-knit working class family, unlike many of his peers. Living outside the community in a neighboring rural area, he was one of the few who took a bus to school. In reading discussion groups, he found himself among many high-achieving sixth graders whose preferences for philosophical, psychological discussion were not agreeable to him; he preferred a group of fifth-grade boys who talked about action and plot. Attempts to pull him into the discussion only made him more aware of his difference. Another focal student became known for her tendency to cut against the grain, to question assumptions and widely held interpretations. During the course of this study's observation, she became a leading figure in the class. While claims for de-centering authority wax toward romanticism, findings suggest that when the teacher gives up power, particular students will take up the slack. (Contains 24 references and one figure.) (TB)

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LITERATURE AS CULTURAL PRACTICE IN A FIFTH/SIXTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

A paper presented at the annual convention of the
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LITERATURE AS CULTURAL PRACTICE IN A FIFTH/SIXTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

This paper reports on an ethnographic study that examined the nature of social and cultural contexts as they shaped literary practices in a combined fifth/sixth-grade classroom. My research questions focused on the meanings given to the reading and discussion of literature within the embedded contexts of classroom and community. The five focal students for the study differed in gender, socioeconomic status, age, and perceived ability. Data sources included audiotaped literature discussions, interviews with students, teacher, parents, and administrators, school and district artifacts, and field notes taken throughout the year.

The theoretical framework that informed this study includes a view of classroom life as a culture enacted through discourse and ritual (Griffin & Mehan, 1981; Turner, 1969). While a culture shares norms and standards for belief and evaluation (Goodenough, 1971), it is also dynamic -- "something actively produced and displayed" as it is co-produced by teachers and students (Pathey-Chavez, 1993, p. 37). Classroom culture is constructed through moment-to-moment interaction; however, such interaction is constituted in relations of power. Given the competing interests and differential statuses represented in most classrooms, Giroux's (1992) definition of culture as "a set of lived experiences and social practices developed within asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 313) seems especially relevant. The meaning of classroom rituals varies depending on one's position and power within the classroom (Turner, 1982). In order to better understand the social positions from which particular students speak and act and the power

relations represented by those social positions, I turned to the interdisciplinary field of performance studies which views all social action as performative. From this perspective, speakers and writers meet or resist the expectations of audiences by manipulating the social codes available within a given context (Bauman, 1977; Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Conquergood, 1989; Schechner, 1988).

For most of the year in this classroom, students spent their reading time in one of three or four small groups. each reading and discussing a particular book related to a single theme. Sometimes the discussions were peer-led and at other times teacher-led. In addition, the teacher, Julia Davis, read aloud to her students nearly every day and scheduled frequent times for independent reading.[1]

In this paper, I'm going to focus on peer-led small-group literature discussions, but what I have to say about them is dependent upon the meaning of the other two practices. Figure 1 identifies what, after data analysis, I have come to see as the dominant meaning of the three main literary practices within the classroom. First, I identify each literary practice (underlined); second, I include the dominant theme or meaning of each practice (bold); and, third, I pose a question that serves to foreground the issue that was most salient within each practice (italics).

Insert Figure 1 about here

In arriving at these themes, I focused my closest analysis on two categories of events: 1) key events -- those that research participants

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[1]All names used in this paper are pseudonyms

characterized as particularly significant (Erickson, 1986; Gumperz, 1986) and 2) illustrative events -- those that were repeatedly documented in field notes and audiotapes (Marshall, 1995). The bounded but interdependent social events I examined were literature events, defined as any school activity related to the reading or discussion of literature. In this paper, I frame one illustrative literature event with the sociocultural conditions of its occurrence, including the social and interpretive competence of the key players in the discussion. Goffman (1981, p. 193) discusses the need for analysis of the social conditions that shape spoken interaction:

> Externally grounded properties whose shape and form have nothing to do with face-to-face interaction must be identified and mapped with such ingredients as are available to and in local settings. . . so, in a deeper way, an author's speaking personality maps his text and his status into a speaking engagement.

In the literature event I depict in this paper, the students are the authors whose texts and statuses shape the interaction itself.

In order to understand the context within which this single discussion occurs, I'll first begin with interview excerpts that key into a purpose for reading literature shared by Julia and two focal students whom she identified as high ability. I had asked Julia on several occasions what she wanted students to get out of the reading and discussion of literature. During an interview that took place in November, Julia had this to say about the subject:

> Mostly that . . . . we all own books in different ways depending on where we are--the life we've lived . . . . I mean, even when we are sitting talking to one another and we know

each other well, there is just always a filter between my brain and yours, and my life and yours . . . and I want kids to know there is no right interpretation, even about nonfiction. I want them to read with a little bit of doubt in their minds about anything they read . . . a little skepticism, a little distance from it. At the same time that I want them to own it, I want them to say, "Oh yeah, this is, this is one way of reading this right now."

In June she added the following comments:

> Imagining yourself having other lives gives you, it seems to me, more power over the kind of life you do lead. . . because often as you are reading a book and a character comes to a situation in which they must make a decision, if the character makes a decision that is very alien to you, you begin to weigh why you would have done what you would have done, and why the character did what they did. And in the character's life, you get to see how this turns out, at least hypothetically.

When I asked David, a sixth-grade focal student, why he read fiction, he replied:

> Because I want, I want to know what they would do. I want to be able to act out what they were doing in a situation without knowing.

Mackenzie, another sixth-grade focal student, explained to me why students are asked to read literature in school:

> Mackenzie: To expand your mind. To make you think about things differently.
>
> Cynthia: Different from your own lives you mean?
>
> Mackenzie: Different from your own lives. Different from what you think of things. Different from what your parents grasp. Different things. . . . I think it's important to learn about things that aren't close to you.

As is evident in their comments, Julia and these particular students give compatible meanings to the reading of literature. To them, reading literature involves entering into the text world, resisting text worlds, and probing one's immediate world.

The exchange I'm going to describe is from a literature discussion involving several girls who perform the reading and discussion of literature in ways that match these purposes, and one fifth grade boy whose ways of reading and discussing literature are demonstrably different. This discussion took place in a peer-led group of eight students. The students were to read and comment on each other's journals. The following exchange took place about ten minutes into the discussion. It was Jason's turn to read his journal on Number the Stars (Lowry, 1989) a book about the Nazi takeover of Denmark. This scene begins with one comment that Jason, a fifth grader, wrote in his journal:

An exchange from a discussion of Number the Stars[2]

Jason: [reading from his journal] Lise died when she was just a few days from marriage which was pretty sad since she was so close to getting married. There was also a king named Christian and then her little story was over.

Nikki: I have a question. Why is it so sad that she got. . . died just before she got married?

Jason: Well cause--

Lisa: Because she was getting married and then all of a sudden she died.

Kate: Duh.

Nikki: But I don't get why that means sad because like it'd be sad if she just got married and died, I think.

David: It'd be sadder. It's always sad when someone dies.

[laughter]

Kate: Not to Nikki. It's like, oh great a person's gone. Yes!

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[2] The following conventions are used in the presentation of this transcript: [text] indicates descriptive text added to clarify elements of the transcript; text indicates emphasis; -- indicates interrupted or dropped utterances.

Nikki: What's it matter if she died before she got married. [Others are talking over her, ribbing her.] I mean, marriage isn't that big of a deal.

Several Students: OOOOH!

Nikki: I mean, all it is . . . they make too big of a deal out of it. I mean I like making a big deal out of it but--

Kate: [laughing] So why are you complaining about it, Nikki, if it's going to be against you. . . . Okay, Nikki, great speech.

[The next few turns were about how Lise's fiancé would feel.]

Nikki: Why did he [Jason] add "before she got married"?

Kate: Because she died before she got married.

Mackenzie: I mean she was just about--and she died!

Lisa: She was just about to get married and have a wonderful, happy life and then she died.

Mackenzie: Maybe her husband could leave her. [laughs]

Nikki: She could have gotten married three days earlier. She would have just gotten married and about to live a wonderful, happy live and then she died.

Kate: So what's your point, Nikki?

Mackenzie: So what's your point? Yeah.

Nikki: Why did he put "before she got married"?

Lisa: Because that's the time.

Mackenzie: Because she died. That's like me saying, um, that's like me saying, Brooke [a student in the class] died on April 1st. See it's like someone saying that.

Nikki: I know but why would he-- ? He said it's sad because she died so close to her wedding. I don't know.

[Nikki and Mackenzie each take a turn that repeats what they've already said.]

Mackenzie: But after she would have had time with her husband. But Nikki, what do you want him to say? She died on--

Nikki: It's sad that she died. [This is what she wanted him to say.] Because if you say it's sad that she died just before she got married--

Kate: It's sad that she died at the car wash.[laughter] It's not like it's sad that she died at that place. It's not like she would rather die someplace else. It's just sad that she died!

Mackenzie: He's giving us more information. More information.

[Nikki and Mackenzie joke about Nikki's lack of "feelings."]

Lisa: Jason, were you finished?

Jason: Yeah

Kate: Sorry that Nikki had to make such a big deal.

Nikki: Well I was just bringing up a point.

Kate: And it lasted forever and ever and ever.

For me, what's most striking about this scene is Jason's absence from it. After his initial quietly spoken "well because. . ." he isn't heard from again. A brief description of Jason will help to contextualize this literature event. Jason was one of two students in the classroom who took a bus to school from a neighboring rural area and was therefore excluded from the tight community bonds enjoyed by students who lived near the school. At the end of the year, students wrote up lists of humorous awards or achievements for their fellow students, and David listed Jason's achievement as "The person on the bus." Jason did not have close friends within the classroom, and his mother reported that his group of friends from last year had broken up when they joined different classes this year, causing her some concern over his lack of social connections. Julia, who described Jason's family as working class, close knit, but not particularly interested in education, believed that Jason was able to perform the role of a student without any actual involvement. She also saw Jason as a student who had

trouble with reading comprehension and often chose books that were too difficult for him. Jason's mother didn't dispute this theory, but she added one of her own that indicated her very real concern for Jason's academic and emotional well being.

> Now the teacher says he doesn't understand the shaping of a story. . . . I have to wonder if it isn't a little bit more than that.

She went on to tell me that one of Jason's friends frequently corrected his grammar, so much so that she needed to tell her son not to worry about it because "So much of that is regional," She described for me what she thought might be the problem at school:

> Now Jason is one kid I do think that does not want to make a mistake. He doesn't want to get laughed at . . . so possibly he felt by offering any opinion, he would be put down.

In attempting to "read" the Number discussion, it's important that I also consider the historical and social context within which it occurred. For the first literature discussion group of the year, Jason chose Alanna: The First Adventure (Pierce, 1983). Many of the students in this group were confident, high-achieving sixth graders and Jason spent much of his time during discussions sitting in silence. Other students in the group reported that Jason's silence was okay because he just liked to listen and learned from listening, and Nikki suggested that others in the group improved their ability to draw him out, but Julia believed that this response simply served their purposes: they wanted to keep controlling the talk and weren't troubled by those who felt uncomfortable contributing. Julia drew attention to this problem when she visited the group, likening it to being invited to a party but not being offered any food. The sixth grade girls, always willing to

play the role of teacher, would then request that Jason pull his chair closer to the others and ask pointedly "Jason, what do you think?" This drew attention to his difference from them and made him more uncomfortable. It taught him to choose his groups carefully in the future -- not according to what book he wanted to read, but according to the age and ability of the other readers. He managed to choose carefully until the discussion group was formed that I describe here-- and this was one which Julia asked him to join. Clearly, then, Jason's own account of his fears supports his mother's hypothesis that he was concerned about how his peers viewed him.

Jason was not unaware of the dynamics involved in being part of a literature discussion group. In our interviews he commented on the fact that it was easier for him to listen and not speak in peer-led groups, and most comfortable for him to speak in groups that were made up of all fifth graders. He mentioned that in the Alanna group the girls didn't invite him to speak until everything he wanted to say had already been said. His sense of the purpose of literature discussions differed from that of the teacher and many of the high achieving readers in the room. While the latter saw the purpose of literature discussion in terms of textual and experiential meaning, Jason indicated that the purpose of literature discussion groups was to demonstrate competence and receive correction when his ideas were wrong.

Jason said that he didn't like discussing big issues because it was too hard and too slow, and that listening to the sixth-grade girls' ideas was okay if it didn't take too long. His favorite group was the optional all-male group that discussed independent reading at the end of the year. This group consisted mostly of fifth graders, who, according

to Jason, talked about "what's happening, how we like the book, what we like about it." Although Jason told me that the gender make up of the group didn't matter to him, just the grade levels, it's interesting to note that his favorite group was an all-male group. In keeping with research findings on the relationship between reading preferences and gender (Sarland, 1991, Cherland, 1992), it was a group where the boys focused on plot and action rather than on character relationships. "I don't care about the characters," Jason told me, "I just care about the plot." Clearly, the Number discussion represents one time that he did attempt to meet the expectations of an audience that valued talk about characters, but he still "disappeared" into non-participation.

It's important to remember what constituted interpretive competence in this classroom as it was constructed by Julia and like-minded students. Julia talked about the importance of distancing oneself from texts and gaining power over one's own life by envisioning the lives of others. Implicit in her view of literature is the sense that literature pushes us in new directions. Nikki and Mackenzie, who also participated in this discussion, expressed similar meanings. Earlier, I mentioned that Mackenzie read and discussed literature in order to "think about things differently." Nikki was a reader who often read against the grain of the text, a role very much in keeping with Julia's vision of what good readers sometimes do. The meaning that these students and their teacher gave to the reading and discussion of literature contrasted sharply with that of Jason, who looked for opportunities to talk about a book's plot, and who felt intimidated by the kind of talk Nikki and others frequently engaged in -- talk that probed institutional or cultural knowledge, the kind of talk Nikki

initiated when she challenged Jason's response to Lise's death before her marriage.

Nikki was a complicated figure in the classroom. While Jason's social and academic status remained fairly stable and relatively low throughout the year, Nikki's changed as the year progressed. A fifth grader, Nikki was in the school's Extended Learning Program, and she loved to read and discuss literature. Reading and talk were central activities in Nikki's home, and her mother felt that Nikki was particularly attracted to ideas and liked to talk about them:

> [She has always] interacted in a very kind of intense level with family members and friends and, and ideas, That sounds silly, but she likes ideas. . . .She's always been quite argumentative -- in a positive sense. Likes to argue.

Nikki's family held alternative views about health care that permeated many of their discussions and shaped Nikki's views about issues that came up at school related to medicine, the environment, euthanasia, and the like. This added to her reputation as an oppositional thinker among her peers. Nikki identified closely with her parents, particularly her mother, often prefacing her remarks with "When I talked to my mother about this, she said . . ." Julia described Nikki's family like this:

> The most interesting child from the viewpoint of class, I think is Nikki, whom I view as being quite middle class in many ways, and yet seeing herself as being a victimized group, that life has been unfair, that the values of the majority culture are unfair to people like her and like the family. I mean all the way from being very extreme about any reference to medicine, to life not being fair, and I think that refers to money.

Indeed, Nikki believed that money was the cause of most of our contemporary social problems. During a book discussion of Alanna, she expressed her preference for cultures that barter over those that exchange money:

> I mean, if everybody just shared then nobody would be poor and everybody would be the same and there would be no such thing as poor and rich because it would be one thing, and everybody would share, and if you were, like, really good at hunting then you could, like, share your meat with everybody; then you trade it for clothing.

Despite Nikki's interest in ideas, in November, Julia reported concern that Nikki wasn't getting heard during literature discussions.

> What worries me about her is she would say such important things and not get heard. . . . and in that position when they are all vying for social power and they are all wanting to be the run of the show, it might be the kiss of death for the teacher to, for them to become teacher's pet, so I'm always hesitant about underscoring that.

My fieldnotes indicate that Julia did indeed demonstrate her approval of Nikki's ideas, patting her shoulder, hugging her, telling her "I can always count on you in a crunch?" However, by January, Julia was concerned that Nikki used her intelligence only to critique rather than for the purpose of positive action. She worried that Nikki didn't think she had anything to learn from others. At times, then, Julia showed appreciation for Nikki's insights during literature discussions, yet at other times she expressed irritation with Nikki's penchant for

critique and argument. Nikki told me why she preferred peer-led discussions:

> The teachers . . . really have their own questions to hand out you know about blah, blah, blah. And then someone says something. You get this really big question in your head and she's like, I mean, you know, she's like finishing her questions and she has just enough time. And then, you know, it's music time and you have this humongous question [but] you never got to ask it or share your comments.

Yet, the excerpt from the discussion under review is evidence of two things: first, that indeed Nikki does get heard, given that other students were more than willing to engage in her topic; and, second, that her peers, at least those who feel empowered to speak, don't let her critique without explanation.

Whereas Jason felt intimidated by sixth graders, Nikki, also a fifth grader, felt challenged by their presence in her book groups. She joined the other fifth-grade girls in their public disdain for the sixth-grade girls, whom they felt were snobby and exclusive, but privately enjoyed what she felt the sixth graders could offer her.

> Sometimes I feel like when I get around the fifth graders and -- tell me if this sounds right, it might sound really snobby or something -- but I just get annoyed because they sound, they are just, they talk about things I haven't even considered talking about. I am just not interested, and they are just kind of immature sometimes.. . . And so sometimes it's fun to get in a group with a tough, meaty group, and a group of more mature people.

Later, Nikki said that she liked being in literature discussion groups with people who "are into deep thinking and they like sharing their ideas."

The discussion about marriage and death was not the only time that Nikki's performative role served the function of critique. Often, during both peer-led and teacher-led discussions, Nikki challenged the status quo, insisting that she wanted to read books from alternative points of view. When a group of students read April Morning (Fast, 1961), a book about the American Revolution narrated by a young boy whose brother was a Committeeman, Nikki brought up an alternative point of view:

> I notice how everyone's like "Oh those Redcoats are horrible," but like we don't really know that because -- that's just our point of view. But the literature that we have here is all written from someone who's thinking of our point of view. But, you know, everyone who fights a war thinks they're right and thinks the other person's a bad guy.

Here, Nikki pushes against a cultural assumption about the American Revolution and asks, implicitly, the question that is central to the teacher-led groups -- that is, why do we believe what we believe? It is no surprise that meaning in teacher-led discussions would derive primarily from the teacher and the students whose performances most closely match the teacher's. Nikki, although she sometimes took the act of critique too far for Julia, gave meaning to literature much as Julia did, and she carried that meaning with her into peer-led groups.

Other students who used literature largely to probe dominant cultural assumptions, identified with Nikki. For instance, as she spoke

about the need for a British point of view, David, another sixth grader in the group expressed agreement, saying "I was just thinking that." In my final interview with David, I asked him if when he thinks about literature discussions anyone's comments particularly stand out for him. He told me that Nikki's did:

> . . . cause she always thinks the same thing as me. She always thinks like, for some books that are from the American side of view, like April Morning, she'll try and think of what the, what the British soldiers are thinking, you know. An that's exactly what I was thinking, so she says a lot of the same things as me.

Over the course of the year, Nikki gained status and by March, was situated as a fifth grader primed to take over as leader the following year. After Nikki gave a report in class one day a very powerful sixth-grade girl in the class leaned over to tell her teacher, who was sitting next to her, that Nikki would be the first woman president.

From a performance perspective, Nikki's interpretation of Lise's death before her marriage both met and resisted audience expectations. Elyse Lamm Pineau (1994), writing about the potential that performance studies holds for educational researchers, notes that performance studies "acknowledges that identities are always multiple, overlapping ensembles of real and possible selves who enact themselves in direct relation to the context and communities in which they perform" (p. 15). These "multiple selves" are everywhere in Nikki's performance, given what we know about her position in relation to her peers, her family, and her teacher. In challenging the notion that one ought to be sadder if someone dies before marriage, she questioned the importance we place, within the dominant culture, on the institution of marriage, suggesting

that perhaps marriage isn't "such a big deal," In doing so, Nikki resisted the version of reality promoted by the text as well (Patterson, Mellor, & O'Neill, 1994). We are formed as readers not only through the cultural and historical conditions of our own lives, but through the construction of the text as well (Beach, 1993). A particular reading formation is clearly promoted in the following passage from Number the Stars (pp. 16-17) telling of Lise's death:

> It was Lise who was not [alive]. It was her tall beautiful sister who had died in an accident two weeks before her wedding. In the blue carved trunk in the corner of this bedroom -- Annemarie could see its shape even in the dark -- were folded Lise's pillowcases with their crocheted edges, her wedding dress with its hand-embroidered neckline, unworn, and the yellow dress that she had worn and danced in, with its full skirt flying, at the party celebrating her engagement to Peter.
>
> Mama and Papa never spoke of Lise. They never opened the trunk. . . Redheaded Peter, her sister's fiancé, had not married anyone in the years since Lise's death.

Thus, the text is constructed to produce a particular kind of response, the one that it had produced in Jason. As readers, our emotional response to Lise's death is to be connected with her impending marriage. The reading formation produced by this text is powerful when combined with that produced by our cultural reverence for marriage. Nikki's response resisted both, and her peers attempted to censor her for having done so. One could say that Jason, although he had given the more conventional interpretation, was censored socially.

Despite her critique, which brought a round of "ooohs," Nikki was uncomfortable setting herself apart from her peers and contesting the expected response, especially for females, to place importance on marriage; thus, when she added that she liked to make a big deal out of marriage, she opened the way for Kate to suggest that her comments about Lise's marriage worked against her own beliefs. Although Nikki resisted the interpretive expectations of both the text and her audience of peers, the latter unwilling to join her in questioning the cultural reverence for marriage, she did meet her audience's social expectations by performing as Nikki was expected to perform: staging a critique and offering an alternative point of view.

While the teacher is absent from this scene, she is always a presence in the classroom. As Bakhtin (1981) would have it, speakers are aware of other voices in or around the interactional context, particularly authoritative voices. Nikki's performative role worked on two levels in relation to her teacher: on the level of interpretation, with Nikki performing in ways consistent with the meaning she and her teacher gave to the reading and discussion of literature, and on the level of social dynamics, with Nikki manipulating the discussion so that it sustained debate, and so resisting her teacher's expectation for how a literature discussion should unfold.

Indeed, the next day when Julia met with the group she commented on the audiotape of the discussion she had listened to. Julia told the students that she wanted them to think about whether or not their turn-taking was equitable and went on to model a different kind of conversation they might have had about Jason's journal. She started by

modeling how Nikki might have expressed her point of view, then moved on to Jason's perspective:

> I think it would be tragic that she died. Whether she died before she got married or after she got married was really irrelevant in relation to the enormity of dying. It doesn't seem to me that it made any difference whether she died before or after she got married. . . .Your feelings and your thoughts would be on the table and then Jason could take them and consider them and say, 'Gee you know I hadn't thought of it that way. But oh I understand what you mean, but, but I think it is almost sadder that she died before she even got to be married because that is one of those -- you know -- life moments when you sort of have made a major choice. And she didn't even get a chance to do that.

While Julia's response focused more on group processes than interpretation, it also legitimized and extended both Nikki's and Jason's interpretation of the text. It inferred possible reasons for their responses, reasons which never got voiced during the peer-led discussion. Although Nikki's critique had been "on the table," the debate centered more on the social nature of Nikki's performance (as in, isn't it just like Nikki to object to something everyone else takes for granted) rather than on the substance of her interpretation and the way in which it challenged cultural assumptions. Whether or not Jason would have responded, had he felt comfortable doing so, with an interpretation akin to the one Julia ascribed to his position, I can't say. But Julia quite literally gave voice to an interpretation that one <u>might</u> attribute to Jason's comment and in so doing she accomplished what O'Connor and Michaels (1993) refer to as revoicing, a discourse strategy which Julia

often employed that serves to authorize the contributions of students who have low status in the classroom community.

With Julia absent from peer-led literature discussions, the work the students accomplished often had more to do with negotiating social roles than textual interpretations. Those students who controlled the discussions, however, were students whose purposes for textual interpretation complimented that of the teacher and students whose social positions were privileged within the classroom and community.

As this discussion excerpt demonstrates, one can view interpretation itself as a performative act embedded in the social contexts of classroom, home, and community. Social positions are important dimensions of the reading and discussion of literature not only in terms of how discussions proceed, but in terms of how texts are understood. The reification and negotiation of social roles were the most salient features of peer-led literature discussions in this classroom. Students used the discussions to re-enact the culture of the classroom, often sustaining, but sometimes interrupting status and power relations as they existed in the local scene of classroom and community.

I use the term re-enactment not only because of its obvious links to performance, a theoretical frame for this study, but also because of the dramatic nuances it suggests. I see an <u>enactment</u> as the dramatization of a set of conditions, a staging that brings those conditions into play with one another to create, in this case, a classroom culture (through the ritual of read-aloud). A <u>re-enactment</u> adds another level of abstraction, in that it is a dramatization of the first drama, in this case a re-staging of the classroom culture. In a sense, then, a re-enactment occurs at a meta-level, it comments upon the

enactment. The re-enactment does not guarantee social change, but it does provide a space for negotiation beyond that which is available during an enactment. Such open spaces occur most often when students are given opportunities to negotiate social roles without teacher surveillance, times when their activities are liminal in the sense that they are truly "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969, p. 95), partially co-opting the role of teacher, partially embracing the role of student, or friend, or rebel.

While there are clear disadvantages to opening such spaces to students, disadvantages I will delineate, there are advantages as well. The social drama that exists in any classroom will surface during peer-led discussions creating opportunities for students to negotiate social positions. If classrooms are going to function, in part, as sites for social negotiation and change, conflict and difference need to be visible rather than hidden dimensions of the classroom. Issues of "otherness" within this classroom were addressed primarily in peer-led groups, during which students engaged in meta-discourse about the meaning of social and interpretive competence in the classroom. It was a time when multiple voices in the classroom came into contact with one another, leading to greater awareness of power, difference, and the control of meaning in the classroom. The heteroglossic nature of these peer-led groups brought to the surface the competing identities students must address within themselves and others, the multiple roles they play within the social networks of their classroom their families, and their communities.

While the de-centering of authority that occurs in peer-led groups has its advantages, as described above, it has its drawbacks as

well. Clearly, the discussion I describe points to drawbacks that include the marginalization of students who are seen as having less social and interpretive competence in the class, the re-centering of authority in the form of students who embrace or accept the role of teacher, and the emphasis placed on social roles at the expense of textual interpretation. The claims for de-centering authority made in both the literature on student-centered classrooms as well as some of the literature on critical pedagogy tend to romanticize the communities created in classrooms where teachers release power to students. As findings from my larger study suggest, when the teacher gives up power, particular students will take up the slack.

Interpretation depends on moment to moment performances that are embedded in sociocultural conditions and contexts. Factors such as status, perceived ability, and gender shape who speaks, how they are received and what they understand and say about texts. When students read literature, they must find a position from which to speak in the midst of the many voices they confront within the texts they read, the classroom they create, and the worlds they inhabit.

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Figure 1. Literary practices and their meanings